

VII. UNDERSTANDING OT POETRY/WISDOM

Old Testament “wisdom” focused on the discipline of applying truth to one's life in the light of experience. The “wise” person was whoever learns to live a responsible and successful life by the principles of God's word. The “wise” (Hbr. *hakam*) are found in many categories: tabernacle construction (Exodus 31:3), navigation (Ezekiel 27:8,9), and political leaders (Deuteronomy 34:9; 2Samuel 14:20; 1Kings 3:9,12). However, “wisdom” was something developed by experience and study for successful daily living. It was not something for one's own personal advantage, for those too eager to be “cunning” would miss wisdom and actually become fools (Isaiah 5:21).

Teachers of Wisdom - There appear to have been three classes of teachers in ancient Israel. Jeremiah (18:18) lists the Priest, the wise, and the Prophet. Ezekiel (7:26) lists Prophet, Priest, and Elder. The Wise Elders did not speak by “thus saith YHWH (to me)” inspiration or with authority. The warrant for their teaching was the harmony that existed between their writings and the precepts of the Torah and the Prophets. A special class of wise men appeared in ancient Israel and their understanding was sought out by others (1Samuel 14:2). Prior to that, selected individuals were given wisdom by God and were recognized as enlightened leaders (Genesis 45:8; Judges 5:7). In the home, parents were to teach wisdom constantly as they advised their children about where to play, who to listen to and who/what to avoid. Discussion and argument, when done in the right spirit, could help people to refine their knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 27:17).

Wisdom Expressed through Poetry - Old Testament wisdom is expressed in poetry, parallelism, acrostics, alliteration, numerical sequences, comparisons (similes & metaphors), parables, allegories, & riddles. Hebrew poetry/wisdom made extensive use of PARALLELISM, which is correspondence in thought or form of one line or section with another line or section. In English we are taught to avoid redundancy, but Biblical poetry constitutes “structured redundancy”.

Wisdom's Foundation - The ancient world possessed wise teachers and scribes outside of Israel's borders and traditions. While they dealt with many of the same kinds of issues, they lacked the foundation - “fear of YHWH” (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). Wisdom must be held and used, for Solomon's early wisdom did not keep him from later disobedience and doing things forbidden.

Job

1:1 - 2:10/ Job introduced as a righteous, God-fearing man. The Adversary challenges the quality/motives of Job's faith and receives limited power to try him.

2:11 - 37:24/ Job is consoled by three friends (2:11) whose comfort and sympathy turn to heated exchanges about the reason for suffering. Later, a fourth young philosopher enters the scene (32:1-5).

38:1 - 41:34/ God enters the scene, humbles Job, and rebukes Job's counselors on their erroneous view that only the unrighteous suffer.

42:1-17/ Job expresses repentant faith and is restored materially/physically.

Messianic Theme - Job 9:23; 14:14; 16:19; 19:25-27; 23:3; 31:15; etc.

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typological Lessons - (A) The innocent man of God suffering so as to deal with Satan's intrusion into the God-man relationship, and (B) The suffering of this righteous man results in daughters inheriting equally with the males

Job is the book where the question of suffering and universal justice are central. There are several main positions advanced:

A) **Satan's proposition** - the righteous serve God out of "convenience" and self-interest, not "conscience." (Job 1:9-11; 2:4,5)

B) **Job's proposition** - he has served God in conscience and conviction and fails to understand why he is suffering. However, even though he wonders at God's justice, he has not denied Him in his affliction (Job 6:10), knows that we must accept whatever comes our way in faith (Job 1:20-22; 2:10), and looks to God for his ultimate vindication (Job 19:25-27).

C) **Job's Friends** - Eliphaz (4:7-9; 5:8,17; 15:20,29; 22:4-10,21ff), Bildad (8:2-7), Zophar (11:2-6,13-20), and Elihu (33:29,30; 34:11; 36:8-12) all have one primary proposition: that one's outward circumstances in life directly reflects his spiritual standing with God - the wicked suffer and the righteous are blessed.

D) **God** - God's power is greater than man can fully understand and His purposes in creation are beyond man's comprehension (Isaiah 55:8-9; Habakkuk 1:1-3). In God's working, the innocent may suffer (as God's Messiah suffers innocently for the sins of others). Man must have faith in God's future deliverance, while confused about some of the things he sees in this life (Habakkuk 3:16-19).

Elsewhere in Scripture we receive support for the proposition in Job that situations and spiritual status are not directly linked in this life. Suffering does not prove anything about the spiritual status of the victim. Job was innocent (Job 1:1-12), Solomon noticed the lack of connection between character and situation in life (Ecclesiastes 8:14), and Jesus separated one's situation from one's spiritual status (Matthew 5:45; John 9:1-3).

Psalms

The Book of Psalms is a collection of ancient Israel's hymns and prayers, some private and some used in the public Temple worship. The Psalms were ultimately intended to form a liturgy for Temple worship. David was its originator, under Divine guidance (IChronicles 28:11,12,19). David appointed three leading singers: Asaph, Heman, and Ethan (IChronicles 6:33,39,44), with choirs under each. Over everyone was the "Chief musician", the first of which was Chenaniah (IChronicles 15:22,27).

There were five definite concepts that found expression in the Psalms: (1) Deliverance in warfare, (2) Cultic Presence of God - the Hebrews, alone amongst ancient peoples, did not represent YHWH with images. Their God was not limited in power or by geography. He dwelt with them in a special way. (3) Thanksgiving for harvest (4) Holy History - Israel had a Divine origin, pattern, purpose, and future. (5) Personal communion with the Lord - personal relationship. [Terrien, Samuel. The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today, pp.19-34]

Each psalm is a literary unit. Psalms are not chapters. Each one stands alone! Psalms have different forms/patterns (119 is an acrostic). Descriptive words associated with various psalms:

- 1) *Tehillah*, "praise" and from this the whole book is named (*Tehillim* "Praises")
- 2) *Shiggayon*, "a discursive psalm" (Ps. 7) from "sh-g-h" - "to go astray" (Hab. 3:1)

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- 3) *Telphillah*, "prayer" occurs 5 times, notably 90:1
- 4) *Mikhtam*, possibly "tablet", occurs 6 times (Ps.16,56-60)
- 5) *Maskil*, "instructive psalm", occurs 13 times (Ps.32,42,44,45,52-55,74,78,88, 89, 142)
- 6) *Shir*, "song" occurs 41 times
- 7) *Mismor*, "psalm" 57 times

Check the heading for any obvious information. The headlines of the Psalms cover four elements:

1. a description of the following composition as psalm, song, miktham, or maskil
2. a personal name, apparently of the author, as "by David", "Asaph", and others
3. a statement of the occasion when a psalm was written, as "when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba" (Ps.51). Also: *Ps.3* -> 2Sam.15:1-18:33; *Ps.7* -> Cush of Benjamin is unparalleled in the OT; *Ps.18* -> 1Sam.19:1ff; 24:1ff; 26:1ff; 2Sam.5:17ff; 8:1ff; 10:1ff; 15:1-18:33; 21:15ff; *Ps.34* -> possibly 1 Sam.21:10ff; *Ps.51* -> 2Sam.11:1ff; *Ps.52* -> 1Sam.22:6ff; *Ps.54* -> 1Sam.23:14ff; *Ps.56* -> 1Sam.21:10ff; 22:1; 27:1ff; *Ps.57* -> 1Sam.22:1f; 24:1ff; *Ps.59* -> 1Sam.19:8ff; *Ps.60* -> 2Sam.8:3ff; 10:15ff; *Ps.63* -> 1Sam.24:1ff; 2Sam.15:1ff; *Ps.142* - 1Sam.22:1f; 24:1ff
4. what appears to be a musical or liturgical instruction, as, "To the Chief Musician" (Ps. 4 & 5)

Imprecatory Psalms - These psalms contain verbalizations of anger and frustrations, but they channel our expressions of anger to and "through" God rather than through directly against the person or group causing our strong emotions. (12, 35, 58-59, 69-70, 83, 109, 137, 140)

Various types of Psalms - A. **Laments** (over 60) for individuals (3,22,31,39,42,57) & corporate (12,44,80,94,137); B. **Thanksgiving Psalms** (65,67,75,107,124,136); C. **Hymns of Praise** (8,19,104,66,100,111); D. **Salvation History Psalms** (78,105,106,135,136); E. **Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation** (50,81,89,132); F. **Wisdom Psalms** (36,37,49,73,112,127), G. **Songs of Trust** (11,16,23,27,62,63,91,121,125,131)

Proverbs

A proverb is a brief expression of a wise observation. They are observations about life by the wise to guide people stumbling through life by means of bad choices. In Hebrew these are *meshallim* (figures of speech, parables, contrived sayings), and they contrast the life of wisdom vs. the life of folly. Folly is characterized by violent crime, careless promises, laziness, malicious dishonesty, and sexual immorality. It urges caring for the poor, respect for leaders, importance of disciplining children, moderation in drinking, and regard for one's parents.

The purpose of Solomon's collection (1:2-4) - to know wisdom and instruction, to acquire living skills and moral discipline. While reading is valuable for learning facts, wisdom comes by doing/living. "Wisdom" is personified (1:20-33; 8:1-9:6) as a virtuous woman and stands in opposition to "madam folly" (5:1-23; 9:13-18), who often is portrayed as a harlot/temptress.

Much in the Proverbs provides background for Jesus' teachings (ex. Proverbs 25:6,7 with Luke 14:7-11).

Various types of parallelism (how the two lines relate to each other):

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- A. **Synonymous** - both lines say the same thing, repeat (Ps.14:34; Pr.12:28; 16:28; 20:18)
- B. **Antithetical** - both lines are in contrast to each other (10:1,5; 14:31,34; 15:1)
- C. **Synthetic** - subsequent statements elaborate on the initial statement (Ps.105:1-5)
- D. **Emblematic** - use of an emblem, illustration, type, or example where one line illustrates the other line (Pr.10:26; 11:22; 25:18,19; 27:15)
- E. **Lesser to greater** - Pr.15:11
- F. **Better this than that** - Pr.16:16; 21:9,19; 17:1
- G. **Apparent contradictions** - Pr.26:4,5 (some fools you answer, some you don't)

Proverbs are not Divine promises - Proverbs 15:25 is not always literally true, for many arrogant people have houses which last a long time. It does mean that God is opposed to the proud, but on the side of the oppressed and needy.

Proverbs 22:6/ is parental training the only influence in one's choice of lifestyle and is this a divine promise? No, bad associates can corrupt good morals (Ps.1:1; 1Cor.15:33). Yet parental training is worth the effort and can go a long way in keeping a young person on track.

Proverbs 22:26,27/ never get involved with another person's debts? Well, be very cautious about it, because foreclosure can be painful.

Proverbs 29:12/ does wickedness automatically infect everyone who serves a wicked ruler? No, but a wicked ruler will tend to surround himself with his own kind!

Proverbs 31:10-31/ an acrostic, based on the Hebrew alphabet extolling the good which an industrious wife/mother contributes to her family. Is this a pattern for measuring wives? No, it is a listing of ideal virtues to be admired and sought.

Some proverbs need to be "translated" to be appreciated - Proverbs 25:24 becomes exaggerated, if we try to think of living in the corner of a modern house with truss rafters and shingled roofs. But in ancient Israel it was not unusual for one to live on the roof (Joshua 2:6). The point comes across that interpersonal relationships are more important than physical environment.

The Proverb (maxim, sentence saying, etc.) was very popular in the ancient Middle East for teaching wisdom. It existed from Sumeria to Egypt and from the time of Abraham to Ezra. Pr.22:17-24:22 was likely based on the "30 chapters of Amenemope".

"The sages who impart their doctrine in this Book do not stand on a lofty height and preach impracticable ideals. On the contrary, their endeavor is to step down to a level which is easily accessible by the majority. Nor do they deal in vague abstractions, but apply the test of common sense and verifiable experience. They urge the fundamental thesis that the morally defective and willfully perverted stand in their own light, deny themselves the real joys of living, bring avoidable troubles upon their head and, though they may at times have a momentary triumph, ultimately fall. On the other hand, to conduct oneself in the light of wisdom means to get the best out of life, discover sources of strength which assure final victory over calamity and evil, and become a blessing to oneself and society. Such, reduced to its simplest terms, is the message of these wise men of Israel." [A. Cohen, Soncino Commentary on Proverbs, pp. xi-xiv]

Ecclesiastes

"Ecclesiastes falls into two equal parts. The first six chapters establish the premise that all earthly things are futile and that the only way man can have personal satisfaction is to live within God's providential blessings. The last six chapters assume this premise and proceed to demonstrate that man can still reap earthly benefits regardless of environmental circumstances. Once man is led to see that earthly values cannot satisfy, he is ready for the conclusion of the book. The conclusion is really a three-fold admonition:

- 1) to work in harmony with God through the words of one shepherd (12:11)
- 2) to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13)
- 3) to realize that God will bring every work into judgement (12:11)

"The Preacher" takes an accurate picture of life. He notices and records the selfishness, hypocrisy, greed, oppression, tyranny, ambition, and the social inequities of life. These things we share with him. He recognizes God's involvement with the world, the providential influence. However, the picture of God's dealings with men is somewhat unfocused. He declares that a definitive understanding of God's ways is not within man's grasp (8:17). The basic question asked: Is there any profit in all of man's work which he does upon this earth? Hard work is an ancient reality (Gen. 3:17-19). Labor and reward is an old cycle. Does it really work? When the book is over, the reader has discovered that there are no "new paths" to be traveled. Someone has already tried everything. Every new generation appears to discover something new (the "new" morality is really just the old immorality!), but they are merely inventing new names to define and describe ancient pursuits.

Lessons to be learned - (1) Ecclesiastes appears to be cynical and negative about life - "all is vanity" because the author is being honest about the inequities of life (3:16,19; 4:1; 8:11,14). Since everything of this world is cursed to a transitory nature, then people cannot and will not find true satisfaction in either the collection of the earth's goods or the pleasure derived from them. Acknowledging the inequities in life, the wise and godly ones should not be discouraged when they are caught by them. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity". (1:2; 2:26; 12:8) is not a cry of frustration, but an emphatic statement of fact. God placed this world under a curse (Gen. 3:17-19; 5:29; Romans 8:20-23) and this futility will continue until the Lord lifts the curse (II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-5; 22:3-5).

(2) Although long-term satisfaction is not to be found in this world/life, there are some temporary joys that God has granted - rest, food, and friends after hard work (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:18-20). The "wise" approach to life - enjoy your life, but do so within the boundaries God has set and will hold us accountable for (9:9; 11:9; 12:13,14).

- (3) Man's primary duty is to fear God and keep His commandments (12:13)

The "vanities" of Ecclesiastes:

man's advantage in hard work - 1:3; 2:11,22; 3:9; 5:16	hypocritical worship - 5:1-6
the desire to learn all things - 1:13-18; 2:21,23; 3:10	discontentment - 7:10; 11:10
excessive wisdom - 1:18; 2:15; 7:16	self righteousness - 7:16-18
pursuit of pleasure - 2:1; 7:4; 8:15; 10:16	sexual immorality - 7:26
mad mirth - 2:2; 7:2-5	lawlessness - 8:3,4
increase of earthly possessions - 2:4-9; 5:11; 6:2	self deceit - 8:11; 9:3
personal accomplishments - 2:11,17,18,20	apparent success of the wicked - 8:12,13
living only for tomorrow - 3:22; 6:12; 8:7; 10:14	influence of evil - 9:18; 10:1

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envy, rivalry - 4:4	unpunished crime - 8:11
laziness - 4:5,6; 10:18	youth spent without God - 12:1
greed - 1:8; 4:8; 5:10,13	

Song of Solomon

An Oriental love story: it portrays a maid who remains faithful to a shepherd even though taken to Solomon's Court and offered the materialistic "good life." It is often viewed as having allegorical application to the Church's faithfulness to Christ although forced to dwell for a while amidst the temptations of this world.

Background - The setting of the story is Israel in the days of king Solomon. A maid of Shunem is fond of a young shepherd, but is taken by Solomon and placed in the harem in Jerusalem. Although Solomon tries to entice her with his wealth or advancement in the Court, she remains faithful to the shepherd. Solomon finally realizes this and grants her permission to return home, which she does and is reunited with her love.

Interpretations - There are three different views of the meaning and interpretation of the Song of Solomon. (1) The *literal erotic* view holds the poem to celebrate the love of Solomon for a young shepherdess of Shulem. The young woman, in the course of her pastoral duties, meets a shepherd and is eventually espoused to him. Her brothers oppose the union and send her to care for the vineyards, so she won't see the shepherd. She meets King Solomon, who tries to win her love, but fails. Her faithfulness finally is rewarded with her marriage to the shepherd and gifts from her reconciled brothers. This view holds the story to be simply an example of a virtuous woman under trial. (2) The *moral* view regards the book as a description of wedded love in the exercise of its highest and purest affections. The message is held to be a statement on the great moral sentiments relating to the holy estate of marriage, based on Solomon's union with the daughter of Pharaoh. (3) The *allegorical* view asserts that under the guise of human love, the love that passes between two loyal and faithful hearts, is set forth the intimate, tender relationship existing between Christ and His people. The frame of the allegory is human conjugal affection. But through this thin, skillfully carved lattice-work there glance out upon us the joy and bliss, the rapture and ecstasy, the strange, tender wondrous play of the deep abiding love of Jesus for His own, and reciprocally, theirs for Him.

Several reasons make ALLEGORY the best means of interpreting the book: (a) This best accounts for the position of the book in the canon of Scripture, (b) this view accords with the instincts of the spiritually-minded, (c) the names indicate allegory: Shalomoh Solomon, the peaceful one or Prince of Peace; and Shulamith, daughter of peace, (d) the fancifulness of some scenes seem to require allegory (2:14-17; 3:1-4; 6:4-7; 4:8), and (e) this view best harmonizes with the Old Testament representation of the relationship of God with His people as a "marriage". The Prophets Jeremiah (2:2; 31:32), Ezekiel (24:16-27), and Hosea (1; 2; 3) make the marriage covenant existing between the Lord and His people, Israel, the ground of their passionate appeals. The New Testament writers reveal the continuing applicability of the Marriage contract to the relationship between God and His people (Ephesians 5:21-32; Matthew 22:1-14; Revelation 19:7-9).

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